



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

Be merciful as God is merciful.

Author(s): Toews, John E.

Source: *The Power of the Lamb* (1986), pp. 17-24.

Published by: Kindred Press.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/777>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.

BE MERCIFUL AS GOD IS MERCIFUL

3

John E. Toews

The Meaning of Jesus' Peace Teaching

"Jesus stood before the Roman governor who questioned him, 'Are you the king of the Jews?' he asked. 'So you say,' answered Jesus. But he said nothing in response to the accusations of the chief priests and elders. So Pilate said to him, 'Don't you hear all these things they accuse you of?' But Jesus refused to answer a single word, with the result that the Governor was greatly surprised.... They crucified him.... Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. Then the curtain hanging in the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook.... When the army officer and the soldiers with him who were watching Jesus saw the earthquake and everything else that happened, they were terrified and said, 'He really was the Son of God!'"

We have studied briefly the teachings of Jesus about peace in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. The big question is, what do these words of Jesus mean? What did they mean in Jesus' day? What do they mean today?

Let's take the second question first—what do they mean today? The peace words of Jesus are now understood in one of four main ways.

1) *The spiritualist interpretation.* This view states that Jesus called people to inner peace through personal conversion. Spiritual renewal implies peace with one's fellow human beings. Peace with the neighbor is understood in terms of personal, one-to-one relationships.

2) *The social gospel interpretation.* Jesus called people to change society, says this view. The world must be changed from a place of oppression and evil to one of peace, justice and love. This change must come about by human effort that is motivated by the love of God revealed in Jesus. The cleansing of society will make personal conversion possible. The elimination of evil in society will make possible peace in personal, social and spiritual relationships.

3) *The revolutionary interpretation.* Jesus called people to revolt and violently overthrow the oppressive Roman government, according to this view. Jesus was a revolutionary Zealot—a first-century guerrilla fighter. The gospels conceal the truly violent revolutionary Jesus in order to make Christianity acceptable in the Roman Empire, this view claims. What Jesus really calls people to is revolutionary violence in order to overthrow all forms of oppression so that God may bring in his Kingdom of peace, justice and love.

4) *The Kingdom community interpretation.* This view says that Jesus asked people to respond to the presence of God's Kingdom by repenting, by believing and by entering the disciple community. Peacemaking was the lifestyle of this disciple community in all relationships.

The Kingdom way

Which of these four ways is most faithful to the Jesus of the Gospels?

The words of Jesus on peace are best explained by the fourth interpretation. The Kingdom of God that Jesus brought involved the creation of a new order of living together in the world. At the center of this new way of life is Jesus' teaching to love God and neighbor.

The radical intent of Jesus' teaching is seen most clearly in the command to love the enemy. The enemy is not just the neighbor

who makes me angry. The neighbor is the foreigner who threatens my life and the lives of the people around me.

At the center of the Jesus way is not the heroic style of living alone by love in the face of evil and violence. Rather, it is the creation of a new order of living together in the world. It involves the formation of a disciple community in the world which calls other people to enter the Kingdom community.

This new community of God's people is to live out here on earth the teachings and example of Jesus. It does so in anticipation of the present and coming Kingdom of God.

The new order of life, or the new disciple community, created by Jesus had all the marks of a new movement intent on changing the world. It challenged the basic assumptions of the existing society; it challenged even the continued existence of the family, the most stable social unit in Jewish society (remember how Jesus told his disciples to choose him over father and mother, brother and sister?).

The challenge of the Jesus way was so sharp that Jesus was crucified as a political criminal; crucifixion was reserved for the crime of treason.

The way of the cross

Jesus accepted his death lovingly and nonviolently. In fact, the Gospels report that Jesus gave his life—it was not taken from him. He absorbed humanity's hatred into his death and so set men and women free. Jesus gave people the freedom to do the ultimate—to kill him. He took the fear and hatred of humanity into his own body and thereby stopped it.

Jesus took this stance instead of calling in the armies of God because his plan of action was determined by the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. He saw his own death as a death for others, a death that would redeem humanity from sin and violence and for God and peace.

The death of Jesus on the cross represents the defenselessness and nonviolence of God. On the cross Jesus shows us what God is like, and in the process gives people an option: they are no longer compelled to kill. They can respond to hatred and violence lovingly

and nonviolently in the power of God just as Jesus did.

Jesus is the proclaimer and the teacher of a new way in the world. But he is more than that. Jesus is the new way in the world.

Jesus in the first century

The Jesus way includes personal salvation and a right spiritual relationship with God. But that's not all. The Jesus way is a new way of being and living together as the people of God in the world.

That is the most obvious meaning of the words Jesus used. His language refers to a very real option for society. Jesus talks about a kingdom, about loyalty, about serving, about lording, about just and loving relationships, about discerning where God's people are in the world, about sharing one's resources, about loving and praying for one's enemies.

The Jesus way is described in language that suggests a new way for God's people to be in the world. They live in the world as peacemakers in all relationships and in all situations.

The shape of Jesus' world

The newness of the Jesus way may be seen most clearly in contrast to the prevailing violence of his time.

Jesus' world was a violent one.

Palestine was occupied by the Romans from 63 B.C. The occupation contradicted Jewish faith. The law of Moses was the revealed constitution of Israel. According to the law, the Jewish people were to be ruled by God through his anointed leader. No foreigner was to rule over the Jews.

The occupation introduced social tensions. Jewish ethnic and religious identity was threatened by the presence of Gentiles and by pagan practices. The result was open antagonism between Jews and Gentiles.

The occupation created an unbearable tax burden. Jewish law required heavy tithes and taxes: the "first fruits" offering (one to three percent of a crop); a 10 percent tithe of all produce or earnings

every year; and a second tithe of 10 percent every year, the annual Temple tax. The amount of tax required by Jewish law was over 20 percent.

To this system of taxation the Romans added an additional 25 percent, including crop and land taxes, and poll taxes. In addition, the Roman army, which involved thousands of civilians as well—wives, concubines, children, servants, slaves, merchants, doctors, veterinarians, etc.—could demand food, and could press animals and people into service. The Jews of Jesus' day were subject to two systems of taxation. The burden was extraordinary. All told, Jews were expected to pay a minimum of 45-50 percent tax a year.

Many Jews could survive only by tax protest. The taxes they did not pay were the Jewish ones, since they could protest the Roman taxes only at the risk of death. Jews became disloyal to the law to survive. The price for this disobedience was exclusion from synagogue and Temple. Such excluded people became known as "the people of the land," and were viewed as unclean by the Jewish authorities. The double taxation system, in addition to causing great economic hardship, thus also served to divide and fragment Jewish society.

The growing violence

The Roman occupation of Palestine led to violent resistance. This resistance was not confined to a small revolutionary party, but embraced people from all segments and all parties of the population. The resistance was especially intense from the accession of Herod the Great in 37 B.C. to the outbreak of the Jewish-Roman War in 66 A.D.

The reign of Herod the Great was one of terror (recall, for example, the slaughter of the children in Bethlehem following the birth of Jesus in Matthew 2:16-18). Revolts erupted throughout the country at Herod's death in 4 B.C. The Romans punished the revolt by killing 3000 Jews in the Temple and by crucifying 2000 Jews outside Jerusalem. The introduction of direct Roman taxation in 6 A.D. (the census of Luke 2) was greeted by a revolt led by Judas the Galilean and a Pharisee named Saddok. Massive non-violent protests were

directed against the policies of various Roman governors, especially Pilate and Caligula.

A guerrilla movement, known as the Zealots, emerged at the time of the census for taxation in 6 A.D. The Zealots waged guerrilla warfare, and sometimes pitched battles, against the Romans and their Jewish supporters. Many of these zealots believed in "holy war." They took as their models the high priest Phinehas, who killed an Israelite and pagan woman for living together and led Israel in a holy war against the Midianites (Numbers 25 and 31), and Elijah, who killed the prophets of Baal (I Kings 18).

The Zealots taught that Roman occupation violated the first commandment (have no other gods), that Roman taxation violated the second commandment (have no graven images) because Roman money had images on it, that circumcision whether voluntary or involuntary was necessary to prevent the desecration of the land and the law, that pious Jews must be totally separated from heathen, and that God would cooperate with the Jews in freeing Palestine from Roman rule if they would initiate armed revolt (which they did in 66 A.D.).

The revolutionary fervor stirred by such zealot thinking was intensified by revolutionary prophets who claimed to be the messiah. Seven such "messianic pretenders" are known from the period prior to the 66-70 Jewish-Roman war. All promised to lead the Jewish people to military victory over the Romans.

The religious zealots who fanned the revolutionary spirit of first century Judaism were not confined to the Zealot party, as many have suggested. Rather they represent a wide cross-section of Jewish people and parties. Pharisees, Sadducees and Essenes, as well as Zealots are identified as part of this spreading and growing violence and revolt.

The quest for holiness

The resistance to Rome was widespread because it was built on a deep and profound spiritual quest in Judaism. Jewish people in Jesus' time, as in earlier times, were concerned to order their corporate

and individual lives so as to be loyal to God, so as to imitate God. The content of this imitation was defined as holiness. Holiness in turn was defined as separation from everything impure. The quest for holiness as separation from uncleanness was the theological and cultural dynamic of Jewish life in Jesus' time. It also was the engine which drove the growing resistance against Rome.

The quest for holiness was based on Leviticus 19:2, "be holy because, I, the Lord your God, am holy." God was holy. God's people must be holy. For God's people to be holy, the law, the Temple and the land must be holy. And the holiness of law, Temple and land depended on the careful observance of the law by the people. All major parties in first century Judaism were committed to this theology.

The two major renewal movements of Jesus' time, the Pharisees and the Essenes, were both committed to an intensification of holiness as part of their quest. All Israel was to live as priests. That is, all people were to live by the laws governing the priesthood rather than the laity.

The intensification of the quest for holiness had two major consequences in Judaism. First, it produced marked internal divisions between the holy and unholy in Jewish society, e.g., Pharisees and Essenes compared to "the people of the land," sinners and tax collectors. Secondly, it pushed Judaism increasingly toward a collision with Rome because Roman occupation compromised the quest for holiness.

The Jesus alternative

Now we can answer the first question we asked at the beginning of this chapter—what did Jesus' peace words mean in his day? Jesus offered God's people, the Jews, an alternative to the quest for holiness by replacing holiness with mercy. Instead of "you shall be holy because I am holy" Jesus said, "be merciful, just as your father is merciful" (Luke 6:36). He also redefined holiness as power to overcome uncleanness rather than as separation from uncleanness. Therefore, he moved freely among the unclean to release the power of God to forgive and triumph over uncleanness.

Jesus' substitution of mercy for holiness as central to imitating

God had two major consequences that reversed the consequences of the Jewish quest for holiness. First, mercy was inclusive, not exclusive. It was forgiving and accepting. Therefore, Jesus welcomed and called all people, clean and unclean, Jew and Gentile, into his kingdom community. Secondly, mercy meant the rejection of violence. Jesus taught "love of enemy;" he rejected the violence of Israel and his disciples; he died as a demonstration of the loving mercy and non-violence of God.

The Jesus way meant a new alternative which his life and death demonstrated for the world. The new alternative introduced was the life of peacemaking, the life of suffering love, based on the loving mercy of God.

Jesus' peace teaching today

The call to follow Jesus is the call to the Jesus way of peacemaking and suffering love together with God's people, the church. When we confess that Jesus is Lord we voluntarily reject coercion and violence as ways of living in the world, and accept that way which has Jesus as its center and the cross as its high point.

That means that biblical peacemaking is centered first and foremost in Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Of course, not all peace movements and causes, however noble, are Jesus-centered or Christian movements. The kind of peacemaking that the Bible talks about can be known only in relation to Jesus as Lord.

Where Jesus is Lord, peacemaking is the only way of life within the Kingdom community and in the relation of the Kingdom community to the world.